

Still Life With Moth Men

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Summary: What would have happened if M&S had made it to that teamwork seminar in "Detour".

Still Life With Moth Men

Somewhere in the Apalachicola National Forest Wednesday Either 4:36
or 4:40 p.m.

"How the hell did we get ourselves into this??"

It was a good question. An excellent question, in fact. The kind of question Dana Scully would have been happy to give some thought to if she hadn't been so out of breath from running.

"Dammit, Mulder, *slow down*!"

Fox Mulder stopped short, and, by virtue of centrifugal force, Scully stopped short as well. Joined at the wrists as they were, sudden movements were not a viable option.

"This wasn't in the brochure." He looked around the frustratingly familiar clearing before turning to face his partner.

In unison, they demanded, "Where are we?"

Her eyes narrowed. "You're the one with the memory."

"You're the one with the map," he shot back.

"Not any more." A pause. "Mulder?"

"Yes, Scully?"

"Why are we even bothering?"

Rather than risk reminding her whose idea had gotten them running in the first place, he grinned. "Teamwork, Scully, teamwork."

She sighed. "I need to sit down."

Mulder was surprised at this--the unusual fact of Scully actually admitting to a need--and then he remembered the handcuffs. Talk about being inseparable. Good God. They sat, Mulder on the ground, Scully on a convenient (if pointy) rock. He looked up at her, eyes dark with concern.

"Scully, are you--"

"I'm fine."

"Of course." Never mind that she was panting like an asthmatic racehorse, or that her face could have stopped traffic. She was fine. It was getting dark, they were cold and hungry, they were shackled together like a pair of escaped convicts in a bad buddy-flick, and had probably gotten themselves lost to boot, but she was just **fine**.

It was then that she saw them.

"Mulder--what's that?"

He squinted in the direction she indicated. "What?"

"I thought I saw... never mind."

"**What**, Scully?"

"Lights. Red lights."

"Where?"

"There." She pointed again.

"What kind of lights? Like crosshairs?" He looked down at his front, searching for a tell-tale beam.

"No." Veracity forced her to add, "More like eyes..."

~~~~~ Monday 1:47 p.m. En route to the Teamwork Seminar

The car radio had been left on the country station for about 20 minutes; more than enough time to drive a normal person insane. Fortunately, mused Mulder, there was not a trace of normality to be found in this car.

In a way it was ironic; this was probably the longest he and Scully had ever sat in a car together without having some sort of uplifting conversation ("Monkey babies, Mulder?"). And they were on their way to--of all things--a conference on teamwork.

Go team.

The two up front weren't exactly contributing to the morale of the group. They were, in point of fact, sulking over Mulder's refusal to participate in a conversation that necessitated perkiness. After

striking out a second time with Scully, who, while eschewing the unpleasant behaviour of her partner, seemed burdened with a congenital inability to supply anything other than answers to direct questions, Kinsley and Stonecypher seemed to have passed a unanimous sentence of Death By Billy Ray.

The worst of it was, they had no one to blame for their predicament but themselves (and, by implication, each other). A.D. Skinner had been turning a blind eye to their combined lack of participation in Bureau workshops (mutual torture sessions, as Mulder referred to them) for years. It had been bound to happen eventually.

But it probably wouldn't have happened so soon if not for a certain little argument.

Fox Mulder would be the first to admit that he was not an easy man to work with. He had his ups and downs, like everyone else, both states markedly characterized by bouts of eccentric behavior. He had come to accept the fact that if Scully didn't put up with him, there was probably no one else who would. Not that he would have anyone else. More often than not, he suspected, she was secretly amused by said eccentric behavior.

One afternoon in particular, they had been discussing--rather loudly and emphatically--a case that had slipped through the cracks of Violent Crimes and landed right in their laps. A seemingly simple matter of the murders of six men, all clobbered with a dull implement Mulder suspected was a golf club. The men had two things in common: they were all doctors, prominent specialists in their fields; and they were all married. (Four of the six were top government researchers, hence the FBI's involvement.) Mulder had offered this postulation--that the men ditched their wives for the fairway on a regular basis.

"That is such a load of bull, Mulder."

"Now, Scully, don't hold back." He crumpled up a page of rough notes and batted it at her. "Tell me what you're *\*really\** thinking."

"Very mature, Mulder." Which didn't stop her from batting it back, along with a couple of pages of her own scrap. "Not only are you perpetuating a stereotype--one you know for a fact to be false--but until we have conclusive proof that the weapon *\*was\** a golf club, your whole theory is just begging the question. Furthermore, you--ow! Hey!" She rubbed her cheek, the site of Mulder's most recent reciprocal paper strike. "That last one hurt."

"Sorry."

She began folding strips of paper into devious little shapes. "You will be."

"And just because short female pathologists don't play golf doesn't excuse the fact that--"

"It's easily verifiable; you'd think that someone would have checked into--"

Their voices and arguments had blended, becoming a kind of spoken

fugue, both exquisite and disturbing in its unity and intensity, finally degenerating to personal rebuke.

"You're so--"

"\*You're\* so--"

"If you'd just stop and--"

"Dammit, Mulder, could you listen to me for just five seconds?"

Unfortunately for our heroes, the Assistant Director had chosen this precise moment to walk in with the (thus far piteously ignored) sign-up forms for the annual teamwork retreat in Florida, apparently determined to handle his two favorite intractables personally and without restraint. Taking in the scene before him--wads of paper strewn over desk and floor and filing cabinet alike, Mulder and Scully practically nose to nose (a sight in itself; she, standing, hands on her hips, he, sitting, arms crossed in a posture of open defiance)--Skinner had placed the forms in front of them, uttering those two fateful words:

"You're going."

By the time all options for reprieve had been exhausted, the only team left to carpool with had been Kinsley and Stonecypher. A pair so clean they squeaked, yuppies in the least commendable sense, the prime example of a Model Partnership.

And so there they were.

Scully, who had been demonstrating a marked preference of the scenery outside the car, met Mulder's gaze as neatly as if they'd timed it. Candidly she had to confess that communication was not something either of them gave much thought to working on; they had something more fundamental, a tacit understanding that went beyond words.

Mulder shifted in his seat again (why that tiny blond twerp had insisted on sitting up front and hogging all the legroom had thus far remained unexplained). After folding his lanky frame into the child-sized space allotted to him (several \*long\* hours ago), he had set the tone of the entire road trip by very politely inquiring if Scully would render her assistance in detaching his right knee from his left nostril. He now brought one ankle up to rest on the opposing knee, and Scully noted with a smile that his socks were mismatched.

Perhaps next time they should inquire about a workshop for the fashion-impaired.

Provided they \*ever\* allowed themselves to be roped into a deal like this again.

~~~~~ F.B.I. Teamwork Seminar Reception Sands Court Hotel  
2:29 p.m.

"Wine and cheese?" Mulder murmured to his yawning partner. "More like booze and snooze."

Scully rolled her eyes at him. It had been, he thought, an apt observation; the serving of rich food and liquor, combined with the warm Florida climate and a *very* un-entertaining speech by the seminar's co-ordinator, had already resulted in several of the less dedicated agents drifting off to dreamland. Scully, despite both her best intentions and Mulder's worst jokes, was herself fighting a losing battle with Morpheus.

"He's used the word 'dedicated' fifteen times in the last half-hour." He crooked an elbow over the back of her chair (the better to whisper in her ear without fear of being overheard) out of long-standing habit. Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they aren't listening, after all.

"I count thirteen."

"You dozed off for about two minutes during the diatribe about 'eloquent harmony'." She reddened. "Scully, are you blushing?"

She leaned back in her chair, completely indifferent to his arm (and the stares this provoked from the row behind them), looking as though she might wilt any second. "It's *hot* in here." She unbuttoned the top and collar buttons of her blouse, fanning the expanse of fair Irish skin thereby revealed (enough to undo in an entirely different sense of the word) with a copy of the itinerary booklet.

Mulder's comment about a striptease did not go over well.

"And now," declared the co-ordinator (in the same monotone that had characterized the entire speech) "it gives me great pleasure to introduce one of our keynote speakers, a top specialist in her field who hails from..."

Mulder unpinned his name tag and dissected it thoroughly, separating the laminate from the card bearing his name and the safety pin from the whole mess. Then, unable to reassemble the various components, he pocketed the incriminating name card and dropped the rest on the floor.

"...a brilliant and remarkable woman who is the embodiment of every ideal we as federal agents strive to achieve..."

He nudged Scully, whose head jerked up.

"Hmm?"

"...professionalism and courage in the face of great adversity have been an inspiration to us all...."

{Your ears burning yet, Scully?}, he started to ask, but never got the chance.

"...Special Agent Angela Rainier." The name was greeted by a smattering of polite applause.

"Ah, I see."

"What?"

She rolled her ersatz fan into a tube and swatted his leg. "That wasn't exactly what I had in mind when I said 'wake me if something important comes up'."

"*What?*"

Then he got a look at the keynote speaker.

Good God, the woman was Selma Hayek in a tailored blue blazer. *Very* tailored.

"Roll up your tongue, Mulder, before you trip someone."

Realizing the futility of trying to convince Scully that this was not what he had meant to draw her attention to, he grinned and went with it.

"We ought to come to these things more often."

"I don't think she's interested in the kind of oral exchange you have in mind." She indulged in a wicked little smile before her eyes closed once more.

Score one for Scully.

~~~~~ 2:52 p.m.

To her credit (damn her), Special Agent Legs-Up-To-Her-Neck Rainier wasted no time in revitalizing the somnambulant group of federal employees. She immediately mobilized them into groups, five pairs to a group, and instructed them that each agent was to introduce his or her partner to the others. No titles or other qualifications were allowed, only names.

{Then what the hell are the name tags for?}

Scully felt several pairs of curious eyes settling on her and Mulder, probably because they were the only male-female team within staring distance. Aside from Scully, gender-challenged unfortunate that she was, the circle was exclusively male. Three of them were openly giving her the fisheye. The rest seemed to be trying not to look. Absurdly, unaccountably, Scully found herself remembering a one-liner from a 50's sitcom: "But--you're a woman!" "Yeah. My husband likes me that way."

She cut her eyes at Mulder, who had suddenly acquired a singularly blank look on his face, and wondered what he was thinking about. (Contrary to popular opinion, their tacit understanding did not extend to her being able to read her partner's mind.)

Probably wondering if Doctor Rainier made house calls. Or in this case, hotel calls.

The guy to the left of Mulder, a not-unattractive young blond in a navy suit, elected to go first. "This is my partner Jim Bradley," he told the group, indicating a stalwart man the size and build of a large refrigerator.

No one, Scully noted, pointed out that 'my partner' was a qualification.

Jim Bradley nodded vigorously. "And this guy here is Steve Chandler." They then proceeded, at great length, to meet Bob and Tom, Pat and Jake, and Don and Brad--all of whom seemed to be eagerly awaiting Scully's introduction.

"Fox Mulder," she said, chucking a thumb in Mulder's direction.

"Dana Scully," he echoed, mirroring the gesture.

A couple of the others exchanged looks.

"You two out of D.C.?" Steve Chandler asked, addressing her as though the chair between them were unoccupied.

She bit back a retort, something along the lines of, no, I just had them put that on my name tag in order to promote mass confusion. "Yep." She looked to Mulder (who was taking a disproportionate interest in the tying of his shoe), wondered where \*his\* name tag had gotten to, then decided it was probably better not to know.

"How 'bout the rest of you guys?" They went round the circle again, simply out of a loss for anything better to do. Then everyone seemed to drift back into whatever talk they had been having beforehand. Chandler made a couple more attempts to engage Scully in conversation over the top of her partner's head. Mulder, she suspected, was enjoying the hell out of the whole thing.

"Yeah, I've never really been to anything like this before, it's a bit embarrassing, actually..."

{The guy can't be more than twenty-five,} she thought to herself.  
{Pretty though. Decorative. A nice bedtime snack.}

"...there are lots of people here from D.C., but we're the only ones from Dallas, so it's nice to be able to..."

{Bedtime snack--Mulder'll get a kick out of \*that\* one. I'll have to tell him later. Maybe.}

She knew she never would. They had a long-standing routine: it was his role to be offensive. Hers was to be offended. Then again...

How often had they eschewed routine in the past?

{God, they're recruiting them young these days.}

"You don't mind if I call you Dana, do you?"

{Or maybe I'm just getting older.}

"No, that's fine."

He wouldn't be calling her anything if she had any say in the matter, but there was little point in being blatantly antisocial. Speaking of which...

Mulder jumped when she elbowed him in the ribs. He had obviously been

ensconced in his own private world. She stood and nodded in the direction of a table in the corner, host to a row of industrial-sized coffeemakers, where the stray agents seemed to be hovering.

"I'll go with you," he told her, gaining his feet in a fluid motion. One hand found its way to the small of her back with the ease of long familiarity as they dodged clusters of animated discussionists and wayward folding chairs.

It didn't take long for him to rip into Chandler. Mere seconds, in fact.

"Y'awl don't mind if'n Ah cawl yuh Day-nah, do yuh?"

Mulder sounded like a ham actor in a spaghetti western (a mixing of food metaphors that reminded her of the fact that she had missed lunch). She rolled her eyes (and tried to ignore the growling of her stomach). "Come off it, Mulder. Not once did he use the word 'y'all'."

"Obviously the object of his desire was not paying attention...."

"He was just being sociable." {You might want to try it sometime,} she almost added, before remembering how sociable her partner could be--when there was a leggy brunette involved. Or a blonde, for that matter... come to think of it, his tastes didn't seem to be terribly discerning....

"Sociable? He practically offered to buy you breakfast afterwards." He handed her a polystyrene cup. The coffee wasn't very good, but at least it was caffeinated. And hot.

"If he adds dinner at a nice restaurant into the bargain, don't bother to wait up."

Mulder's eyebrows climbed almost a full inch. "Who are you, and what have you done with Special Agent Dana Scully?" Blue eyes blinked up at him, innocent as ever.

He flashed her a devious grin. "Let's ditch. Find out where they hide the bar in this swanky place and make the most of our monster-free hours. This transparent make-work session can't possibly last much longer anyway... What do you say?"

"Tempting, but I think I'll pass."

"C'mon, I'm buying. How's that for a sweet deal?"

"As much as I would love to watch you drink yourself into delirium--"

He dismissed this with a motion of his hand. "Uh-uh, Scully, you've had the opportunity to observe my bender behaviour several times now, without according me the same privilege. You owe me."

She cocked an eyebrow at him. "Are you saying you'd like to get me drunk, Mulder?"

He nodded enthusiastically.



"Oh, come on. I could drink you under the table any day."

"You preach so well, Dr. Scully, but I have yet to see you practice." The devious grin made an encore appearance. "Care to put your money where your mouth is?"

"Drinking \*and\* gambling? No wonder people think you're a bad influence on me."

"Nice to know I've had some impact after all these years of attempted corruption.... So are you in?"

She sighed, both of them knowing she would be ever the sensible one.

{Isn't that all the more reason to go for it??}

"Sure, why not?"

Grinning from ear to ear, he replaced his free hand on her back and steered her towards the door.

{No one ever suspects the sensible one...}

~~~~~ 4:10 p.m.

"Chocolate or cherry, Scully?"

She blinked, bemused. "What?"

"You've been eyeing that dessert cart for the last twenty minutes."

Disdaining the cloying, smoky atmosphere of the bar not ten seconds after their arrival, Mulder had conducted her to the hotel's three-and-a-half star restaurant. A drink was a drink, after all--plus the added entertainment provided by his partner, who was at this moment engaged in intense self-contention over an ornate piece of chocolate cake. Or maybe some luscious pastry... who knew? She had been full of surprises these past couple of hours.

"I have not."

Talk about your implausible denial.

"Oh, come on, Scully--hell, you're practically salivating. What's it gonna be?"

She lifted a sleeve to get a peek at her watch. "It's almost dinnertime, Mulder. Maybe later."

"We're practically on vacation. You can afford to spoil your dinner."

"You must be on vacation every day of the year."

He drained his glass of beer. "You wound me deeply."

One of those smug Scully smiles.

In a contemplative tone, he remarked, "I don't see why you can't have dessert before dinner. It's all food, right?"

"It's just the way of things, Mulder," she replied. "Necessities out of the way first, and then--the sweet hereafter."

"What if you can't stand to wait?"

Her expression was positively beatific. "Some things are just worth waiting for."

"Scully, do me a favour and be bad, just this once. And finish your drink. You're supposed to be matching me."

"We could be missing an important part of the seminar, you know," she told him matter-of-factly, between sips of amaretto and cola.

"I'll bet." Watching her track the destination of a particular confection, he pounced. "I've finally found the chink in the Enigmatic Doctor Scully's armor," he announced proudly. "*You* have a weakness for chocolate."

"And *you* have mismatched socks."

Mulder ducked under the tablecloth to verify this. "What're you talking about?" he demanded, resurfacing. "They're green. They match my tie."

He all but jumped at the unexpected sensation of her toe, prodding his ankle. Her *bare* toe. "No, this one is green." She shifted in her seat before touching at his other ankle with the corresponding foot, adding, "*This* one is burgundy."

{Since when does she make a habit of taking her shoes off under the table?}

"You just made that up so you could play footsie with me." He hiked up his trouser cuffs and examined the socks a second time. Damned if he could tell... Then again, what the hell had possessed him to buy colored socks anyhow?

"If I wanted to play footsie with you, I could do better than that."

"Is this the voice of experience talking?"

To his delight, her face had acquired just the faintest flush of pink. "Maybe."

He nodded to the inquiring gaze of the guy pushing the dessert cart. It came rattling over to their table. There was no backing out for her now. "Take your pick," urged Mulder, smiling broadly.

She deliberated only a second before pointing out a sinfully creamy slab of cheesecake smothered in hot fudge sauce. The same was dutifully set before her.

Dessert fork poised and ready, Scully gave it a look of what could only be described as passionate longing. "I should *not* be eating

this."

"Don't let that stop you."

She plunged the fork in. "Don't worry, I won't." She sat silent for a moment, savouring the first mouthful. "Ummmm... That's goooood." She captured a second bite's worth and popped it into her mouth. "Oo 'aff--" she paused for a swallow-- "to try this."

"I considered it, but figured I might lose a finger in the attempt."

She extended a forkful in his direction. He accepted it, one hand guiding hers towards his mouth. It **was** good--rich, velvety, warm and cool and melting all at once--but they were obviously enjoying it on entirely different levels. He licked the chocolate from his bottom lip and grinned.

"What is it with women and chocolate, anyway?"

"Apparently, there's a substance in chocolate that increases the production of certain female pheromones. Tends to incite many of the same effects as sex--most notably mild euphoria and a general feeling of well-being."

{Chocolate equals afterglow? Trust Scully to know that--and to be able to talk about it so clinically.}

He shook his head in mock consternation. "So many years, wondering what I've been doing wrong... and all I had to do was bring candy instead of flowers. Oh, for a time machine!"

She rolled her eyes. "But, anyways, I was telling you about that consultation I was called in to--"

"As long as there is food on the table, I'm going to have to ban any story involving the use of the phrases 'Y-incision', 'Stryker saw', 'subclavian artery', and the ever-popular 'running the gut'."

"Spoilsport."

"Another drink, Scully?"

"If you're having one," she replied demurely.

~~~~~ Come the dinner hour, neither of them were even slightly tipsy.

Scully wasn't entirely sure whether to be relieved or put out.

They were lingering over their fifth round of the afternoon, and for the last half-hour had fallen to indulging Mulder's taste for off-color jokes. As it happened, Scully's repertoire of same was incomparable, and it didn't take long for her to amaze her partner with her prolixity.

"Scully, you just keep unfolding like a flower."

She smiled. "You can't be a navy brat and not have heard these at

least once."

He planted both elbows squarely on the table. "Okay, I've got one. There are these two guys in a bar, an army man and a navy man--"

"If it involves a genie, a stewardess, and two farmer's daughters, I've heard it."

"No, but you're definitely telling that one next."

"Go on."

"So both of these guys have quite a lot to drink, and they both end up in the men's room at approximately the same time. Well, the navy man finishes first, and goes to leave without washing up, and the other guy calls after him, 'In the army, they teach us to wash our hands afterwards.' And the navy guy turns back to him and replies--"

"'In the navy, they teach us not to piss on our hands,'" Scully finished, going so far as to indulge in a giggle. Maybe the alcohol was having its inevitable effect on her after all.

She was half-heartedly trying to get Mulder to renege on his offer to foot the bill--and failing--when she happened to spot a familiar form approaching.

Special Agent Bedtime Snack himself.

"Hello again," he chirped, doe-brown eyes fixed on Scully.

Mulder muttered something that bore a distinct resemblance to "Git along li'l dogie", but was otherwise reasonably well-behaved. (That may have had something to do with a well-placed tap on the right shin, neatly administered by Scully's left foot a split-second before Chandler's singsong greeting.)

"Guess I missed you all earlier."

{Hear that, Mulder? 'You all'. Two distinct words.}

"Guess so," Scully replied.

"So, Bradley cut you loose for the evening?"

If there was a subtext to Mulder's question, Chandler missed it by a good country mile. "Went to call his wife."

"Have a seat," suggested Mulder, a gleam in his eye that was positively predatory.

"Thanks." Poor kid. He was an absolute lamb to the slaughter.

"So, either of you folks married?"

Scully shook her head, trying to remember the last time she'd even had a real date (Ed Jerse notwithstanding). During the Bush administration, wasn't it? She distinctly remembered one of the topics of conversation being Dan Quayle... ugh.

"Not that I know of," Mulder deadpanned.

"Me neither. The work don't leave much time for it, I guess. That, and I haven't found the right woman yet." This line, which could easily have been twisted into a come-on, was delivered with a boyish earnestness that had Scully smiling despite herself. Mulder was smiling too, but there was something almost... unseemly in it.

{Do foxes prey on lambs, I wonder?}

"Dana, right? And, ah... Wolf?"

"Fox. Mulder's fine."

"Right. Can I buy you two a drink?"

Mulder shook his head. "Maybe some other time," he said, clearly without meaning it. "Actually, I was just leaving."

{Since when?} It wasn't like Mulder to pass up a chance to poke fun at a steadfast young agent--especially if the victim was willing. She caught his eye and was rewarded with a surreptitious wink.

Chandler actually looked disappointed. "Really?"

"Yeah, it's about time I head up to play 'Meet the Roomie'. Can you believe that our government--the same one that is probably, at this moment, spending nine hundred and fifty dollars on a hammer--is too cheap not to double us up?"

"It's one way to meet new people," Chandler posited.

"How about you, Scully? Can't put it off much longer..."

"I've met mine." Scully was barely able to suppress a low growl.

"Yeah?"

"So have you. Sharon Stonecypher."

Mulder rocked back in his seat, his smile morphing into a categorically evil grin. "Lucky you."

Scully tossed her cloth napkin at his face. It didn't hit nearly hard enough for her liking before falling to the floor.

Mulder stood. "You kids have fun now. I'll grab the tab on my way out, Scully."

"Talk to you later."

{Meaning, please feel free to drop by and deliver me from an evening in Stonecypherland, the preppiest place on earth.}

"Here, let me get that for you." Chandler practically dove under the table to retrieve the errant napkin.

"Thanks."

"It's green," Mulder noted helpfully.

She shot him a look (the napkin was red and he knew it, like as not).

He deflected her glare with a wave and a smirk, and was gone.

"You two been partners long?" Chandler asked.

"A few years."

He puzzled over this a moment. "And y'all still call each other by your last names?"

{Well, I'll be damned. The much-debated contraction rears its head after all.}

"Just a habit we got into, I guess." They'd already been through this with Kinsley and Stonecypher. There was no point in going into the myriad facets that constituted their own personal dynamic--that it was Mulder's way of showing his partner the type of equality afforded by one agent to another, of not talking down to her; that Mulder could rarely hear his own first name without his psyche being dragged, kicking and screaming, back to that horrible moment when his sister called out to him for the last time; that, in moments of particular closeness or intensity, Mulder had called her Dana, and it had been a disconcerting experience--so she didn't bother trying to explain.

"Aw, I'm sorry, I guess it's none of my business if you don't get along. I forget sometimes, not everyone gets as lucky as Jim and me." He nodded knowingly, rushing headlong into the next topic of conversation without giving Scully a chance to explain that it wasn't that at all. "Now, y'think you could let this poor boy indulge his natural Southern hospitality by buying you a drink?"

It was a more genteel line than most of the ones she'd heard recently, she had to give him that much.

Of course, most of the lines she'd heard recently had come from her partner.

"Maybe some other time," she said finally.

~~~~~ Sands Court Hotel Room 509 8:49 p.m.

There had been a great many things said about Fox Mulder over the years, but "he is a patient man" was rarely one of them.

After indulging in a shower and a call to room service, he gave Scully fifteen minutes before diving for the phone--five minutes more than he had intended, as a matter of fact, but he'd had to placate a large and bellicose salesman from Chicago who had suddenly showed up and insisted that this was *his* room. Expostulating with him produced little response other than an agitated pawing and snorting (the man qualified as an X-file in and of himself--the human rhinoceros). At long last, Mulder had flashed his badge, claimed he was on an undercover assignment, and told the guy to buzz the hell off before he got himself arrested.

He then seized the receiver and dialed the room number Scully had given him.

"Scully, it's me."

An ominously familiar chirp replied, "Fox?"

Wistfully, Mulder realized it was too late to back out now. "Listen, Stonecypher, I need--"

"You can call me Sharon, you know."

Having no use for this information, he ignored it. "I need to talk to Scully for a second."

"She's, uh, she's in the indisposed right now."

"Do you know how long she'll be?"

"I really can't say. She's been in there for about a half-hour."

{Can't say I blame her...} "Could you let her know I called?"

"Sure will."

"Thanks."

~~~~~ Exiting the bathroom (where she had contrived to remain for as long as was reasonably possible), Scully raised her eyes to heaven in a silent prayer that her roommate might have disappeared and/or spontaneously combusted in her absence.

As is often the case with such things, her prayer was pitifully neglected.

"Did I hear the phone ring?"

Scully was not liking the Cheshire cat grin on Sharon Stonecypher's mobile little face.

"Yessiree. Fox called."

"Mulder," Scully amended absently.

Stonecypher shrugged.

"Any message?"

"Nope."

"Okay, thanks."

Stonecypher sat on the end of her bed, regarding Scully expectantly. Well, if she thought Scully was going to call Mulder back with her sitting there gaping like that, she had another thing coming.

Scully walked across to her side of the room and began rifling

through her bag, looking for her sweats. Maybe she could go for a run--the change of clothes an ideal excuse to take refuge in the bathroom once again... if she turned the faucet on, she could use her cell phone and--

"So how long has it been going on?"

"How long has what been going on?"

"You and, uh, Mulder."

Scully, who had elected the deadpan approach, continued sorting through her clothes. "We've been partners for about five years."

"You know what I mean." She smiled conspiratorially. "I understand, you don't want to fire up any rumours. Don't worry, I'm not gonna say a word." Good God, could she actually be serious? "I'm just curious, that's all." This amiable approach was met by a stony silence on Scully's end. "Come on now, it is kinda obvious."

"\*It\*--assuming I take your meaning, you are referring to a sexual relationship, am I right?--is also 'kinda' a bad idea," Scully retorted. "I'd like to credit myself with a bit more common sense than to do something that might jeopardize my position on the X-Files and bring my judgement into question--to say nothing of endangering my life, or my partner's."

Stonecypher reddened. "Sounds like you've given this some serious consideration."

"Sounds like you haven't."

"I just thought--"

"I doubt you did, or you wouldn't have asked."

"You know what they say--where there's smoke, there's fire."

"Well, in this case you've got yourself a false alarm."

~~~~~ At 9:03, Sharon Stonecypher announced she was going to "jump in the shower".

Scully was in Mulder's room by 9:05.

"She's driving me nuts, Mulder!" Scully paced the length of the room.

Mulder was stretched out on the rumpled bed in his shirtsleeves, looking enviably relaxed; long legs crossed at the ankle, hands tucked behind his head, face impassive. Eyes fixed on the pitifully tiny television across the room. The agent *he* had been assigned to room with hadn't been able to make it to this year's workshop, due to the paltry matter of a gunshot wound in his left foot. Obviously not a dedicated fellow. (He had ignored Scully's remark, to the effect that any number of people would rather shoot themselves in the foot than room with Mulder, putting it down to jealousy.)

"Is that a clinical term, Dr. Scully?"

Why did it seem like he was always calling her that lately?

"I don't know why she's suddenly decided to take an interest in our relationship--"

"What relationship?" His face took on a mischievous cast.

She played it straight. "That's what *I* said. What are you watching?"

"'Cannibal Women in the Avacado Jungle of Death.'"

Scully paused in mid-pace, staring at the screen. "Yikes."

"Give it a chance, Scully... 'Our' relationship, meaning yours and hers, or...?"

She shot him a {what do you think?} look. "Where's your minibar?"

Mulder pointed. "She thinks there's something going on between us?"

"Mulder, *everyone* thinks there's something going on between us." She rooted through the minibar, uncovered the requisite series of tiny bottles, and squinted at the labels.

"Everyone who?"

"Where have you *been* for the past five years? Skinner does. My mother does. Agent Beatty does. The waitress at that crummy little coffee shop you keep dragging me to on Monday mornings does. OPR is just waiting for one of us to slip up and admit it. Violent Crimes even has an office pool going." Smirnoff's was starting to look pretty damn good. She held the bottle up in silent suggestion.

"Any orange juice in there?"

"Enough for one screwdriver each."

He placed a sunflower seed in his mouth, split it, and drawled, "I'd be happy to make them, but that would necessitate my having to move..."

"So what's going on in this movie?"

"Well, these Pirahna Women, so-called because they use their men for procreative purposes and then make jerky out of them--"

"How eminently practical. I like them already." Ice tumbled into plastic hotel cups with a dainty *clik!*. "Let me guess--the Pirahna Women, much like the heroines of a certain type of movie you don't own and never watch, go bouncing through the forest with next to nothing on, brandishing spears in very suggestive ways..."

Mulder, gentleman that he was, courteously refrained from pointing out which one of them had once been particularly open to suggestion via television.

"What ways would those be, Scully?" he asked guilelessly. "Care to demonstrate?"

"In your dreams, Mulder."

"Undoubtedly. Actually, though, this isn't that type of movie at all. See, these women control the avocado jungles of California--"

"California??"

"Scully, it's a *movie*.... What'd she say to you, anyway?"

"Apparently we're pretty lousy at hiding what's not even going on."

Mulder smiled lazily. "And what is it that's not going on?"

"Birds do it. Bees do it. Even educated MD's do it," Scully replied mockingly.

"Just because we kept company almost exclusively with each other the whole day, cut out early from the afternoon seminar, I tried to get you drunk, and now we're sneaking into each other's rooms? That *is* a bit presumptuous." He shifted, making room for her on the bed.

"This is a great scene--Dr. Hunt, the overtly independent and skeptical scientist, bears a suspicious resemblance to someone I know." He scratched his head in feigned bewilderment. "Can't think who that might be...."

She handed him his drink and plunked down beside him. "We are not on duty, Mulder. I did not have to 'sneak' in here."

"You did, though."

"It's not exactly a good idea to advertise the fact. I think we've given enough people enough wrong ideas already, don't you?"

Silence, punctuated by staticky T.V. dialogue.

"What are they betting on?"

"Who?"

"Violent Crimes. The pool?"

She dipped her fingers into her drink, fished out an ice cube, and popped it into her mouth. "How long it can go on before we're caught in flagrante delicto. A bonus to whoever catches us."

Mulder considered this a moment. "You think there's still time for me to get in on this lucrative deal? We could make a killing, Scully, simply by virtue of having the inside track. I'll even split it with you. Sixty-forty."

A pillow to the head served as an appropriate reply.

~~~~~ Room 509 Wednesday Sunrise (6:02 a.m.)

Morning came far too soon for Dana Scully.

"Ohh, Gawwwwd..." she moaned, burying her head under the pillow. It--her head, not the pillow--didn't seem to be of much use to anyone at the moment (considering that it felt like a steel drum band was banging out a rousing rendition of 'New York, New York' at some point near the base of her skull), so she figured hiding it until the screamingly white sunlight went away was the thing to do. "Mul-derrrrr..."

"Now there's a noise to bolster a guy's self-esteem," Mulder remarked. It was too early in the morning for that kind of good humor, damn him. "Provided he knows what he did to occasion it."

"Close the blinds!" she yelled--well, it sure sounded to her like she was yelling. The light obligingly dimmed, but didn't disappear entirely. "I can't believe I let you talk me into this."

Mulder chuckled. In point of fact it hadn't taken much talking--Scully had been drowsy, extremely comfortable, exasperated with her roommate, and on top of it all had forgotten her room key, which would have necessitated waking said roommate at the ungodly hour of 3:14 a.m. to let her in (doubtless prompting a thorough investigation into what activity could possibly have kept her in Mulder's room until three in the morning). Persuading her to occupy the extra bed was as simple as 'You can borrow one of my shirts, if you want.'

"I'm going for a run," he explained, stripping away the bulk of warm, soft covers in one merciless gesture. She rolled over, curled up into as tight a ball as she could manage, and mumbled into the mattress, cursing Mulder, Stonecypher, Florida, and teamwork in fabulously graphic (and anatomically improbable) terms. The chuckle became a broad laugh, unrestrained and fascinated amusement at the appearance of a precious rare sight: Post-Debauch Scully, cranky, foul-mouthed, and showing quite a bit of skin, recalcitrance personified compounded by a mild to moderate hangover.

Well, Fox Mulder could go unprintable himself for all she cared at this point.

"You'd better come, don't you think?"

"Ugh." She licked her lips, trying to shake the sensation that her tongue was wearing a little sweater. "How do you figure?"

He tossed a pair of world-weary grey sweats onto the bare sheet beside her. "'I got up early and went for a run with Mulder' makes for better copy than 'I spent the night in Mulder's room', wouldn't you agree?" He held aloft a pair of white tennis shoes, size six. Most probably the ones she had kicked half-way across the room the night previous. "Don't make me dress you, Scully. My high moral character tends to remain in a dormant state until after my morning run."

There was nothing else for it at this point. She sat up (too suddenly, inciting the over-enthusiastic steel drum band to strike up

the theme music from Return of the Jedi), tucked her knees to her chest, and threw out a glare. Mulder--tousled, unshaven, shirtless and shorts-clad--was rummaging through his bag.

"She and Kinsley go jogging together every morning at five-thirty--you heard them bragging about it in the car. She's already up."

"All taken care of." His voice was somewhat muffled by the sweatshirt he was struggling into, but she could hear that devious grin emerging again. "I cancelled her wake-up call."

"Mulder!"

"And I left a message for Kinsley, to go without her. Female problems. He won't know I meant you."

She scowled at him so hard she could feel her eyes starting to cross. Head and arms now emerged from the appropriate holes, he stretched, ran a hand through every-which-way hair, and grinned.

"I even went in and messed up your bed, just in case."

"Do I want to know how you managed that one?"

He indicated a red-tagged keyring on the bedside table.

"That's the concierge's spare key to your room. If he doesn't get it back in about five minutes, I have to take him to an Orlando Magic game--and, to be honest, I'd rather build a tower of furniture." He watched her rise slowly, carefully, and pad off to the bathroom, shirttails falling to just above her knees. (Instead of the expected t-shirt, in response to her acquiescence Mulder had produced one of his older 'work' shirts, a faded blue Oxford. He rarely wore it anymore, due to an apparently indelible bloodstain on one sleeve, but it was well-used and comfortable.) Framed in the doorway, this time the look she shot him was a grateful one.

"That's a good colour for you, Scully," he observed. "I've always liked you in red."

Did he ever plan to let this thing go?

"And hey, look, my socks are a matched set this morning."

Obviously not.

"Mulder?"

"Yeah, Scully?"

"Next time we decide to have a sleepover, let's just play 'truth or dare'." She disappeared into the bathroom without giving him a chance to bounce back.

"I'm all for that," he informed the bathroom door.

~~~~~

"It's just dumb, Scully, and I'm not doing it."

"What's the matter, Mulder? Don't tell me you're scared..." Scully cocked her head and regarded him gravely--quite a feat, considering she lacked the usual facade of authority presented by her neat, strongly-coloured work clothes.

The agents had been asked to dress comfortably for the first day of exercises, some of which would require "mild" physical activity. Apparently the system these people had adopted to rate degrees of activity was the same one used to determine the piquancy of salsa; Scully, for one, had been having Quantico flashbacks all morning. In addition to everything else, the guys from California had clued Mulder in to their habit of referring to the female agents as 'Breast Feds', a term that obviously amused her partner a great deal. "You try it, even once..." she bit back the insufficiently scathing threat, which involved something even the amazons of the Avacado Jungle would have found a bit extreme.

The activities themselves were simple enough: most involved one person being blindfolded or otherwise incapacitated, and having to take direction, verbal or physical, from the other. A few necessitated competing against--and on occasion wrestling with--other teams. While Scully could certainly hold her own, it hadn't taken long for Mulder's absent-minded athleticism to grate on her nerves.

Things had gone from bad to worse when Angela Rainier made her way over to their end of the makeshift gymnasium. Suddenly Mulder--and the two guys they happened to be tackling--had gone into what could only be described as spontaneous testosterone generation mode. Fortunately the general male enthusiasm resulted in a lot of energy getting spent very fast, making it easy for Scully to pin a quick one on her own assailant before helping Mulder with his. Despite the damage to his masculine pride, the win had saved her partner's teeth--sufficiently to enable him to flash the full set at Rainier.

Scully never got the full set. At the best of times she was witness to an incisor or two. Well, it was a relief to know he still had them all, considering all the times he'd gotten himself punched in the mouth...

Rainier had smiled in return--at both of them--before offering Scully her congratulations. She had asked if they would be willing to demonstrate the next exercise. Suddenly Mulder seemed to have morphed into Mister Teamwork. He was happy to help out. Whatever she needed.

Then she had explained what the next exercise entailed.

Suddenly Mulder wasn't smiling anymore.

"Can't you do it?" he demanded petulantly.

"Don't tell me you don't trust me..." she planted both sneakered feet squarely on the mat and did a couple of quick bends to loosen up her knees.

His mouth turned up at the corners in a barely perceptible grin. "Never that. I just don't see what the point is, that's all."

"I thought we agreed there was no point to any of this. That didn't stop you earlier."

He considered this, then nudged her playfully in the true spirit of "one-of-the-boys" camaraderie. "Yeah, we kicked some serious Nevada ass, didn't we, Scully?"

"We sure did, Mulder."

They stood silent for a moment while Rainier explained what was to be done, then introduced the two agents.

Mulder fixed Scully with a pleading gaze. She sighed, relented, and turned around. He tied the blindfold at the back, tugging at the knot to ensure it was safe. "Too tight?"

{No, Mulder, it always annoyed me that there was free blood circulation to my brain.}

He waved a hand before her eyes. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

She reached up to scratch her nose, surreptitiously giving him the finger. "Same question."

This particular exercise was by far the most ridiculous of all, as far as Mulder was concerned. He helped his now-sightless partner up onto the platform and guided her to the starting point. The idea was for him to direct her over, under and around several obstacles that were being set up now by Rainier and one of the guys from the Golden State. The objects looked harmless enough--a footstool, a doorframe, a low bar that Scully could probably walk right under now that she wasn't wearing her high heels, and the like.

"Remember, Agent Mulder, you can only give one-word directions, and you are not allowed to name the objects or to answer any questions your partner may ask." She readied her stopwatch. "You have two minutes. Agent Scully, are you all set?"

Scully nodded in Rainier's general direction. She looked so tiny and vulnerable up there--deceptively so. But the same diminutive attributes that tended to make his partner a target had worked in her favour in the past, providing her with an invaluable tool: the element of surprise.

"Go!"

The low bar was the first thing in Scully's path. She took a tentative step forward. "Uh, duck," Mulder commanded. She dropped her head low and took another couple of steps. "Lower," he called out. She hunched forward, put her hands on her knees, and narrowly cleared the bar. This wasn't so hard after all. "Up," he told her. She straightened and continued on.

Scully completed the course in the required two minutes with ten seconds to spare (although there was a sticky moment where she'd nearly stumbled over the footstool) and remained standing perilously close to the edge of the platform, trying to work herself free of the blindfold.

"That was excellent work, you two," Rainier was saying. "I'm impressed."

"Thanks."

"Okay, Mulder, I'm very much in awe of your knot-tying abilities," Scully remarked. "Think you can spare a moment to restore my sight?"

"You and Agent Scully been partners for quite a while now, haven't you?"

Mulder nodded.

Rainier was making notes on her clipboard, an action that held Mulder's attention much longer than it should have. "It's obvious you work well together."

"So we've been told."

"You're a pathologist, Agent Scully?"

"Uh-huh." Scully absently took a step towards the source of the voice--and found herself falling forward. Mulder put out an arm to grab her, a second too late, and could only watch helplessly as his partner tumbled head over ass onto the floor. Naturally, she knew how to fall properly, but it still looked like it hurt.

"You okay?" He helped her to her feet, as gently as possible, and deftly untied the blindfold. Muffled laughter bubbled to the surface of the crowd of surrounding agents.

"Sorry about that," Rainier added.

"It's all right," was what her mouth said. "No harm done."

But her eyes told the truth.

She was going to kill him. Slowly, painfully, and with dull implements, she was going to torture him in every secret doctor way she knew, and then she was going to physically kill him. Twice, for good measure.

~~~~~

The first thing Scully did, after the morning's activities, was hit the showers, deeming it far more productive than hitting her partner might have been (though not quite as satisfying). She had hoped she'd have time for a bath, but the next round of mutual torture sessions began at one-thirty, and she and Mulder had already claimed their afternoon of grace. In a way, the shower was better; less time to spend contemplating the lovely bruises she'd acquired over the past four hours. There was a real beauty, right on her...

Mulder, damnably cheerful, was stretched out on her bed when she and a wall of steam emerged from the closet-sized bathroom.

"Looks like I got here just in time for the floor show..."

Damn him. She snapped the terrycloth robe shut, belted it, and glared.

"Get your feet off my bag, Mulder."

"Sorry." He rocked bonelessly into a standing position and straightened his tie. "I just came up to see if you were ready to go to lunch. Stonecypher let me in."

"She would." She yanked the bag open and snatched up the first outfit that came under her hands. He stood right behind her, inhaling deeply for some reason she preferred not to inquire into.

"You smell much better," he remarked.

{I am not going to dignify that with a response,} she thought. {I'm ready to believe in the power of telekinesis if I can just turn around and find him gone.}

He tugged lazily at the collar of her robe. "Scully, are you naked under there?"

"Mulder, grow up." She jerked away, which only served to make him more determined. He grabbed her sleeve and pulled. She felt the robe start to slide off her right shoulder... "Knock it off!" She jabbed him in the ribs with her free elbow, enabling him to get hold of her arm and pin it against her shoulder before she could retreat. She stopped struggling and faced him squarely, trying to be rational. "I'm really not in the mood for this, okay?"

"Sorry." He dropped his hands to his sides and took a step back.

"I'd like to get dressed," she announced pointedly. He showed no intention of leaving. When he actually began gesturing for her to get on with it, she walked to the door, threw it open, and made a gesture or two of her own.

"Look, Scully... I apologized about the damn platform. Profusely. What else do you want?"

"I want five minutes to put my underwear on, for God's sake!"

He turned to face the door... and waited.

"Mulder, get out!"

"What's the matter with you?"

"I just think it would be nice to see you taking this seminar a bit more seriously, that's all." {Preferably without the added inducement of one Angela Rainier.}

He turned back to her, doing a double take. "Seriously? Yesterday--"

"Yesterday was a mistake," she told him flatly. "I was hot and bored and I let you talk me into playing hookey. As a result I now have a pounding headache and a dry mouth and I want you to get the hell out of my room!"



He left, slamming the door on his way.

She slumped into a chair, sopping and irritable, and massaged her forehead. It was going to be all right, they just both needed some time to cool off. Maybe there was some way they could be separated for the afternoon. She flipped through her itinerary, found the day in question--and cursed vehemently.

{Just what I need.}

~~~~~ Apalachicola National Forest Wednesday Either 2:23 or 2:27 p.m.

They hadn't made it more than a mile from the starting point before Scully noticed that her partner was not speaking to her, even perfunctorily. He didn't seem to hear a word she said. The equivalent of a mental ditch. Wonderful.

The next twenty-four hours were to consist of a single activity--capture games in Apalachicola National Forest. This, thought Scully, would have been the one to skip. She and Mulder had been slated as Passives: essentially, prey. Once a Passive team made it to a certain point in the forest, they became Aggressives and were free to capture others. Half the teams, however, were designated Aggressives from the beginning, and if you got yourself caught, you were obviously not dedicated enough.

"The first fire we make, I'm going to burn those magazines of yours."

That got his attention.

"What?"

"Don't bother trying to look innocent. I saw you stuff them into your bedroll, Mulder. Two 'Penthouse's and an 'OMNI'." She smirked. "I'll let you keep the 'OMNI' if it's a warm night."

She expected a retort, or at the very least the lopsided grin that was his standard disarming tactic. Instead, Mulder whirled around and closed the distance between them so fast he set her off-balance.

"Where do you get off talking to me like that?"

She blinked, eyes wide. "Mulder--" Neither observed the rather singular bush that seemed to be creeping up on them.

"No--you know what? On second thought, why don't you really rip into me? You've been waiting to do it all afternoon... Come on, Scully, take your best shot. Don't let a little thing like five years of friendship hold you back."

She opened her mouth, waiting for the words 'I didn't mean it, Mulder' to spring forth--and was surprised to hear herself say, "You certainly don't, when it suits your purposes."

"What the hell is *that* supposed to mean?"

"You're the brilliant Oxford grad. You tell me."

"Don't jerk me around," he growled. The bush continued its odd pursuit undetected.

"And you don't think I feel jerked around every time you take off?" She ran a hand through her hair. "I like to think of myself as your partner and not as an appendage to Fox Mulder's X-Files, but you certainly don't make it easy. My name isn't even on the office door, for God's sake! It's like--like you're keeping your options open. Even after all this time."

"But you--but I never..." he gestured helplessly, hot anger becoming mired in an ever-persistent guilt. "I don't... shit. It's always my fault, isn't it?" He bit off the words, as if he hadn't planned to say them, but couldn't quite stop them from being said. "How does it feel, Saint Scully, always being right? Doesn't perfection get boring after a while?"

"Mulder--" she paused, then decided she might as well say it now. "Why is it you have to be either oblique, aggressive, or self-deprecating? Why can't you just be--"

"Just be what? More like you?"

"Just be honest with me."

He bristled, visibly. "I have **always** been honest with you."

She watched him, steadily, knowing she didn't have to say the words aloud for him to hear them. He had known--about her being barren, about her ova being harvested--for months before he had even said anything. She watched him, and thought of this, and suddenly found her anger was no longer directed at him.

He seemed to sense it too. "But finding the right moment is a real bitch," he added.

She felt herself smile at that.

"Scully?"

"Yeah?"

"I thought I was keeping **your** options open."

"I didn't see it like that, Mulder."

"You--you really feel that way?"

She nodded. "Sometimes."

"Don't," he implored. "Please don't. I don't. You know I could never have done any of it--**any** of it--without you. Because you have always respected the journey. Because you are the only one to earn my trust. And because I'm completely useless when it comes to reading a map." Now came the lopsided grin, the final touch in what had been a pretty devastating argument. "Truce?"

She extended her hand to meet his.

The strangely-behaving bush suddenly grew two arms--including a hand brandishing a set of handcuffs--and before Mulder and Scully knew quite what was what, they had been locked together at the wrists. Her right to his right.

And the world's most annoying voice yelled, "Mike! I caught them!"

~~~~~

Scully thought Kinsley was never going to stop gloating. When he finally did, however, it was to address them in such a decidedly patronizing tone that even the gloating would have been better.

"Are we all ready to go?"

Mulder and Scully had quickly been relieved of all their gear--as if they had the remotest chance of getting away with the two Poster Agents for Bureau Sycophancy flanking them--and were now (due to the damned handcuffs) forced to stand one behind the other so they could both face in the same direction. Out of obvious necessity, Scully was at the front.

It made her angry to think of those two being close enough to overhear a conversation she had assumed would be kept between her, her partner, and the trees.

Mulder raised his hand timidly in an excellent imitation of a second grader. (The effect was, however, damaged somewhat by Scully having to raise her conjoined hand.) "Actually, I have to... water the greenery?"

"Agent Mulder..." For one wild second, Scully thought Stonecypher was actually going to tell him he should have thought of that before he left. "Mike?"

Kinsley shook his head.

"Now that's just inhumane," Scully interjected. "Even if he did manage to get away, he's not allowed to finish the course without \*me\*." She focused on Stonecypher, who seemed at least mildly sympathetic--probably already succumbing to the infamous Mulder Charm. "What's the matter with you two?"

"Mike, why don't we--"

"It's a trick." Kinsley handed Scully a bedroll to carry. In stony silence she handed it back.

Mulder shifted from one foot to the other. "What a choice--indignity or indecency." Kinsley passed him the bedroll, which was summarily dropped to the ground.

"You might as well just accept it, Spooky--we caught you."

Scully felt Mulder's hand clench into a fist. His voice remained surprisingly even-toned, however.

"Scully's going to be very upset if I have to ruin her new hiking boots."

"Damn straight," Scully added, increasingly worried that her squirming partner wasn't just putting on an act. Kinsley grabbed her free arm and hung the bedroll over her shoulder. She let him.

"Start walking, you two."

So they walked, single file. Alphabetical order, no less. Kinsley, Mulder, Scully, Stonecypher. The latter, engrossed in her trail map, wasn't watching as carefully as behooves a good little agent--so, after checking to make sure the sleeping bag wasn't hers or Mulder's, Scully ditched it. Kinsley and Stonecypher would just have to share. Hell, she was probably doing them a favor. It was shaping up to be a cold night.

Good God. She was getting as bad as Mulder.

~~~~~

"I'm not kidding, Kinsley." Mulder's voice had acquired an edgy keening note over the course of about half a mile. "I would appeal to your common sense, if I thought you had any, and remind you that you're directly in the line of fire."

Kinsley did not rise to the bait.

Putting out a hand to warn Scully of his intention, Mulder stopped walking. Stonecypher, who was not forewarned, trod on both of Scully's heels. Scully bit back the colorful curses she felt rising to her lips, and simply glared.

"I am not taking one more step until I am allowed to ease my biological need," Mulder announced.

Despite herself, Scully smiled.

"Oh, for pete's sake!"

All eyes focused on Stonecypher.

"Now *I* have to go."

Mulder regarded her with a look of joy that was almost cruel.

"Life's a bitch, ain't it," he drawled cheerily.

Sighing, Kinsley set his pack down at his feet. "You go first, Sharon."

Oddly enough, Mulder didn't object. Scully watched him for a cue, but none was forthcoming. She realized he was looking at her with the same expectancy.

Stonecypher jogged off into the bushes, ponytail bobbing. Kinsley was crouched down, tying his shoe. Whatever they were going to try, she realized now was as good a chance as they would get. She stood on

tiptoe, placed a hand on his shoulder, and murmured something in his ear.

That was when her whole body went limp.

Thankfully, Mulder managed to grab hold of her as she fell--emitting the expected cries of alarm. "Scully? Scully!"

"Ooooh," she moaned. Her eyes fluttered open for an instant before closing again. He lowered her gently to the ground.

"What's wrong with her?" Kinsley demanded petulantly.

Mulder, now kneeling beside his friend's prostrate form, flicked his eyes upward to glare at the other man. "I don't know!" He grabbed her by the shoulders and tried to shake her into consciousness. "Scully! Scully, talk to me--" Leaning forward, he placed his cheek next to her mouth. "Kinsley, I don't think she's breathing..."

Kinsley paled visibly. "Stonecypher has the first aid kit--"

"Well go **find** her, dammit!" Mulder shifted Scully's head back and pinched her nose, preparatory to beginning mouth-to-mouth, as Kinsley dashed through the underbrush calling his partner's name.

"He's gone," Mulder whispered.

"Finally." Scully sat up, rubbing her nose (Mulder had been a bit too exuberant in his pinching). He pulled her to her feet, just in time to hear Kinsley and Stonecypher doing a fair imitation of a stampede. Their eyes met, and they took off running, back in the direction they had come.

And so they ran... and ran... until finally it occurred to Mulder to ask:

"How the hell did we get ourselves into this?"

**** Apalachicola National Forest Wednesday Sometime after sunset

"Mulder... Mulder, I think my watch has stopped."

It had gotten pretty damn dark before either of them had bothered to speak again. There didn't seem to be much to say. Despite her earlier protestations, Scully was dead tired and just glad to be sitting down. And despite his earlier protestations, Mulder did have a pretty good idea of where they were supposed to be headed--now it was just a matter of getting there without getting caught.

Kinsley and Stonecypher, for God's sake! If it had been anyone but them.... A day ago Mulder would have conjectured that that particular pair couldn't catch pneumonia if they tried. But he was not ready to concede defeat--and, judging by her brilliant little fainting ploy, neither was his partner.

Brilliant. It **was** brilliant. He knew he should have expected nothing less. She had managed to reveal her intentions to him in five little words: "Better catch me this time."

Who said they had a problem communicating?

They were seated on hard-packed soil, backs against what Mulder desperately hoped to be a tree. After a few awkward moments, they had finally found they could both sit comfortably with Mulder's right arm encircling his partner's tiny shoulders. Her hand clasped his, to ease the pull on both their wrists. Ominous clouds and a lush canopy of leaves had conspired to hide the moon and stars from sight, depriving them of what little light there was to be had.

"Mulder...?"

"I hope you won't be disappointed, Scully, if I say that this was not how I had envisioned being handcuffed to you."

Although it was too dark to see her face, he caught that little intake of breath that meant she was trying not to laugh. He squeezed her hand. She squeezed back.

"I must be delirious, Mulder--not only am I finding that funny, but that rubbery brie they tried to feed us the other day is actually beginning to strike me as appetizing."

"Scully, I have a confession to make."

He felt her tense up. After his last confession several hours earlier--that he really **did** have to 'water the greenery'--she wasn't sure if she was ready for another one. (He'd been pretty brash about it, unable to resist remarking that he'd have made a damn fine navy man, nudge nudge.)

"What?"

"I've been holding out on you."

She shifted, turned her face up to his. "What do you mean?"

"Want some sunflower seeds?"

She didn't seem able to decide whether to be angry or grateful. Elbowing him seemed like the best option. "Mulder, you cheat!"

She could **hear** it--that insouciant smile. "I brought them along in case of just such an emergency. Always be prepared, right?"

"Leave it to you to bring sunflower seeds and no matches."

"Do you want 'em or don't you?"

Scully was surprised to find herself salivating. "Where are they?"

"In my pocket. Hang on, I'll--" He twisted around suddenly, lifting his arm and yanking Scully's hand up over her head.

"Ow!" she exclaimed. "Dammit, Mulder, sometimes you are functionally useless. Sit still. Which pocket?"

"The right one."

Her hand disappeared into his jacket pocket. "They must have fallen out..."

"Jeans pocket."

"Oh." After a moment of hesitation, she leaned forward and located the pocket by virtue of his waistband. She reached in. He yelped.

"Very funny."

"Cold hands, warm heart, is that it?"

"Something like that." She tugged out the plastic bag, opened it, and set it between them.

"In some countries you'd be required by law to marry me now," he told her through a mouthful of seeds.

"Well, then, it's settled. As soon as we get back to civilization I'll have to make you an honest man. Relatively speaking."

Mulder blinked. He certainly hadn't expected *that*.

Scully cracked one between her teeth. "Mmm, they're nice and warm," she teased, settling into the circle of his arm.

"Scully! I'm suddenly seeing a whole new side of you."

"Is that a good thing?" The words were out before she realized why their familiarity was *not* a good thing.

Blissfully unaware of the parallel, Mulder chuckled again. "We'll have to wait and see."

That small divergence was enough.

They ate the whole bag of sunflower seeds in that manner, exchanging wisecracks and chatting, and then lapsed into a companionable silence that gradually became slumber.

Somewhere between midnight and dawn, Mulder was struck by something. Literally *struck*. Some large, soft object fell, seemingly from the heavens, and conked him square on the head.

"What was that?" he asked of no one in particular, least of all Scully, who was at that very moment soundly asleep on his shoulder. His whole arm had gone numb by virtue of her using it as a pillow. He thought wistfully of a few areas of hers he might use in the same capacity, but none of them seemed particularly appropriate to their working relationship.

The object now rested against his leg. Once he was a bit more cognizant he sat up and grabbed blindly at it, trying to decipher what it could be. It was soft and cool, rolled and tied up with some sort of lace. A blanket. A bedroll.

A bedroll?

"Scully, wake up."

"Hmm?"

"Scully, you're not going to believe this."

"Probably not." She didn't even open her eyes. "You saw a sasquatch?"

"No--a bedroll just fell on me."

"Right, Mulder. It's raining sleeping bags. 'Night."

She turned over so that her back was to him, and sighed. Her breathing was deep and even. He doubted she would even remember this conversation in the morning.

He looked up at the sky in wonder. "Somebody up there likes me," he told no one in particular, least of all Scully, who was once again sleeping peacefully.

Then, not one to look a gift horse in the mouth, he unfolded the bedroll and covered himself and his sleeping partner.

~~~~~ Apalachicola National Forest Thursday Dawn

Dana Scully woke with a start, wondering where in hell the sleeping bag had come from. For a fleeting moment, the combination of a warm blanket, a yielding surface, and her sleep-numbed mind had managed to convince her that the past couple of days had been nothing but a vaguely amusing nightmare. Then she had tried to turn over, to the express disapproval of her sore wrist, and found herself still attached to her recumbent partner in an entirely literal sense.

Leaving aside for the moment (and possibly for quite a while to come) the issue of how she had ended up on the opposite side of him, with one arm tucked around his waist and her head resting on his chest, she sat up, yawned, and stretched her free arm. He didn't move. He looked deceptively peaceful--face unlined, body relaxed--although she couldn't fathom how *\*anyone\** could relax with their neck at that oblique angle. At least she wasn't as sore as one might expect--although the unexpected was merely par for the course, whenever she and Mulder were concerned.

Her thoughts returned to the sleeping bag. It was ordinary in every sense of the word, dark blue with a gaudy print design on the quilted underside. She smiled. It reminded her of one of Mulder's ties. Speaking of whom...

"Mulder?"

A split-second before her hand connected with his arm, his eyes flicked open. "Good morning to you too, Bright-Eyes," he murmured, in the amiable timbre of one who has been awake for hours.

"Sleep okay?"

"Oh, yeah, you bet." He shifted to a sitting position, arching his back to produce a series of semi-ghastly crunching noises. "Sorry I



had to move you, but I was losing the circulation in my arm."

Well, that was one mystery solved. "How did--what--where'd this come from?" She indicated the bedroll.

He grinned. "You don't remember? 'Right, Mulder, it's raining sleeping bags,'" he teased, in a fair imitation of Scully's tone.

She shook her head. "Care to enlighten me?"

"Well, my initial appraisal, that it was a gift from the heavens--" she expected, and quite rightly so, that he would be unable to pass up the opportunity to leer-- "was disproved after the sun came up, and I found this." He reached across her still-covered form and came up with an all-too-familiar magazine. OMNI. The special alien abduction issue.

But that would mean that...?

He stood, for once careful not to wrench her arm out of its socket, and helped her to her feet. They stepped back from the tree about twelve paces (Scully-sized paces) and directed their gaze upward.

Tangled among the higher branches of the tree under which they had spent the night were the survival packs they had been issued at the start of the course. \*Four\* of them.

Mulder's grim expression matched her own. "It seems our friends Kinsley and Stonecypher left us a little care package."

~~~~~

"Almost--almost--oh, for God's sake, Mulder!" Scully's voice floated ethereally down through the leafy canopy. "I wish you'd hold still..."

He grunted and tried to straighten his back. If nothing else, he reflected, this was proof positive she had gained back the weight lost during her illness. "We don't always get what we wish for, Scully. I, for example, wish you were wearing a skirt."

Even a clip to the chin with a running shoe was not enough to wipe the grin off his face--despite the fact that inside the shoe was a little Scully foot, the companion to which was perched precariously on his shoulder.

"At least I'm wearing sensible shoes," she retorted. "Steady now...."

Climbing the tree had obviously not been an option in their diminished capacity--but the bags weren't *that* high up. About the length of a couple of exhausted federal agents end to end, as it happened. Ladies first, of course. When Mulder had suggested this he, frankly, had not expected her to agree. Certainly not as quickly as she had--and *not* with that evil glint in her eyes.

"Muld-errr--"

She wavered a moment and he steadied her, automatically.

"I've got you."

"So I noticed."

He immediately shifted his grip to a somewhat more gentlemanly domain. This timely sensitivity on his part was rewarded by a bonk on the head. The canteen managed to bounce off his knee before hitting the ground, adding injury to ignominy.

"Look out below!" Scully called, a bit too belatedly for his liking.

"Thanks for the warning."

"Yeah, well, I'd like to see you do this with one hand."

"Sounds good, let's trade."

She made an exasperated noise. "Why is it men always have to be on top?"

He felt like his jaw was going to drop right off. What had gotten *into* her these past few days? "Scully, do you kiss your mother with that mouth?"

"Yep. It's a multipurpose tool. Hold *still*." He resisted the urge to squirm as she stood on tiptoe, leaving what were likely permanent indentations on his clavicle. A string of muffled curses made its way down to him.

Multipurpose, indeed.

"So much for the merits of sensible shoes...." He braced his free arm against the trunk of the tree and forced the words out. Maybe if he kept talking, the discomfort would just go away.

"There's a lot to be said for an extra inch or two," she agreed. He hadn't even had the chance to open his mouth before she added, "in *height*."

Breathe in... breathe out... "Am I really that predictable?"

"It's the thought that counts--I got one, Mulder! Watch out!"

The knapsack came crashing down through the branches, landing at Mulder's feet. It was the standard gunmetal grey pack that had been issued to all the Aggressive teams.

"Come on down, Scully, let's see if we got the one with the prize inside."

She managed to make her way down without kicking or kneeing him anywhere particularly vital (his nose had taken a beating on her way up, prompting Mulder to remark that although it may not have been a feature he cared to draw attention to, it happened to be the only one he had), though the proximity involved was not a good thing for a man who intended to keep his wits about him. Together they crouched on

the ground and began a thorough search of the knapsack.

"Aha!" Triumphantly he tugged out a tiny silver key.

"Mulder, you're a lucky man."

He took her hand, turned it over, and fitted the key to the lock of her cuff. "I'm surprised at you, Scully. Luck? There's no scientific explanation for luck." A flick of the wrist and she was free.

"We had a twenty-five percent probability that this was the right bag," she remarked, massaging her wrist. "Given the statistical data, the height of the tree, wind resistance, the overall length of the trail, the likelihood of Kinsley and Stonecypher taking the route they did, and the time it took us to get here yesterday..."

"Yeah?" He removed his own cuff, stood, and helped her to her feet.

"Mulder, you're a **very** lucky man."

She was contemplating the bags. He was contemplating her. "Damn straight. Now, let's see what they left us to eat."

~~~~~ "You're just going to make it worse," Mulder cautioned her.

Scully, who had been absently scratching at the little strip of sunburn over the bridge of her nose, scowled at him. "Which of us is the M.D. here, Mulder?"

"How many guesses do I get?"

She didn't bother to qualify that with a response. Her revenge would doubtless be exacted when the reddening patches on his own face became bothersome. She contented herself with being able to move her arms, and to walk beside her partner rather than being dragged behind him or shoved in front.

"I've really got a bad feeling about this, Scully. Those two aren't the type to just wander off. I mean, they synchronize their watches, for crying out loud."

Scully nodded her agreement, but didn't speak. When he got like this, it was usually pointless to try talking to him until he had worked out whatever theory he was aiming for.

"You said you saw lights, earlier, Scully. What kind of lights? How many?"

"I told you before. Just a few reddish flashes. A chance gleam in the eye of some hungry chipmunk, most likely. A trick of the light. I'm not even sure I saw them."

"You saw them more than once." It was not a question. The timbre and cadence of his voice changed, becoming slower, rougher, deeper. "But you only told me about the first time."

How the hell did he know?

"And there were two each time. A set. Like eyes."

It was, for lack of a better word, spooky.

"Am I right?"

"We've been under the sun for hours, Mulder, during the brightest parts of the day--" she resisted the urge to scratch--"not to mention the pitiful three or four hours of sleep we got last night. There's bound to be some strain on the eyes."

"But then it would be happening to me too. And it isn't." She didn't know *\*where\** to begin pointing out the fallacies in that statement. So she didn't.

He turned on her with what she had come to think of as the tight-beam look; focused, intense to the exclusion of all else, boring deep into her. A gaze hard-won for the trusted, the truth-givers, yet lavished on the Phobes and Bambis of the world. Her eliciting the tight-beam look from him traditionally necessitated either bleeding or tears. Or both. This was the first time she'd seen it since her remission had become apparent.

"I'm fine, Mulder." A knee-jerk reaction.

"Never said you weren't," he replied evenly, still in that same husky tone. "If I'm on the right track you're probably in a better position than I am."

"What?"

"What color were the lights?"

"Why would..." Of course. The twin reflections had been striking to her because of the stark contrast of red against the cool shades of the forest. For someone unable to distinguish between the two... someone who was red-green color blind, for example... they would be undetectable.

They nodded at each other in unspoken understanding. Then he reached out and brushed her lingering fingers away from her face.

"Don't make me put socks on your hands, Agent Scully."

Embarrassed at being caught out like that again, Scully covered with, "I can't believe one of us didn't bring sunscreen."

"Which of us is the M.D. here, Scully?"

She mulled over that a moment, then, for lack of a sufficiently scathing reply, stuck out her tongue. Delighted at the descent into childishness, Mulder did it back.

"When did you become such a tease, anyway?"

She smiled. "I've had five years to learn from the best."

They arrived in a clearing that was exactly like every other clearing they had arrived in thus far. It would have been fall-on-the-floor hilarious if it wasn't so frustrating. "Okay, three things," he

announced, slowing to a stop and taking Scully by the arm. "First of all, why were the bags up in the tree?"

"Presumably to protect them from something." She glanced around them at the ominously silent woods. "They did give us a handout about bears before we left..."

"Just what I was thinking. But you don't just throw your gear up in any old tree along the way, right? You do it when you're setting up camp."

"So they were setting up for the night, and then what? They got eaten by a bear?"

The corners of his mouth quirked upwards. "We can hope."

"Seriously, Mulder."

"If they'd been eaten, we'd know about it. It would have happened right here, because, let's face it, what hungry animal wants to drag its food around? Now, because of the backpacks, we have to assume that whatever happened to them happened around or after it started to get dark."

She decided to let that stand for the moment. "And whatever happened to them would be...?"

"Against their will, for starters."

"How do you figure?"

"Can you seriously picture either of them going two steps into the woods and leaving their government-issue survival gear behind?"

"We did."

He grinned. "My point exactly."

"So who do you think--"

"Not who, Scully. \*What\*."

"Okay, let me be sure I have this all worked out: you're suggesting some wild animal grabbed Kinsley and Stonecypher--who are, all kidding aside, two experienced agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation--incapacitated them in some way--"

"Now, I never said incapacitated--"

She held up a hand for silence. "--and dragged them off into the wilderness somewhere, for no particular purpose?"

"I'm sure it had a purpose. And I'm not so sure it was an animal."

"For God's sake, Mulder, tell me you don't think it was one of the women from the Avacado Jungle."

"30 years ago, the town of Point Pleasant, West Virginia, was

terrorized for over a year by something witnesses described as primitive-looking men with--get this--red piercing eyes. They became known as the 'moth men'."

"You have \*got\* to be putting me on."

"I've got an X-File dating back to 1952 on it."

"What would that be filed next to--the cockroach that ate Cincinnati?"

"No, the cockroach that ate Cincinnati is in the C's. Moth Men would be over in the M's."

{All right, Mulder,} she thought wearily. {I'll bite.} "So what did these Moth Men do, exactly?"

"Attacked and killed livestock, terrorized people--you know, the usual."

Scully ran a hand through her hair, which was getting limp and matted with the humidity. "Leaving aside the likelihood of such a story, not to mention the prevalence of rather extreme forms of science-fiction in the fifties, that was in West Virginia. We're in Florida, Mulder, forty years later. Don't tell me the Moth Men just decided to get away from it all."

"Well, moths love bright light, and Florida is the Sunshine State."

"You're getting stale, Mulder."

"I'm suffering from heat stroke."

"You said there were three things."

"I did." He took hold of her shoulders, spun her around, and aimed her at a break in the undergrowth. "Now, I defer to your expert opinion on this, Scully, but I believe that is a scrap of yellow cloth stuck to that branch over there."

Scully went over to the branch and pulled off the bit of cloth, which seemed to have been torn from a garment made of nylon. "Wasn't Stonecypher wearing a yellow windbreaker?"

"As a matter of fact, she was. Near as I can tell, anyway."

Scully checked her wristwatch, put it to her ear, and then smacked the face of it and demanded the time.

"Four-thirty."

She sighed. "We're late anyway. We might as well. But if this is a trap, Mulder, your ass is jerky."

"Lead on, Doctor Hunt."

~~~~~

Mulder was just about to suggest they pack it in, when he heard it.

They'd managed to follow what might have been a trail for about twenty minutes, until locating its end in a tiny copse of trees and overgrown bushes. The woods had succumbed to another of those strange silences that seemed to happen every so often. He'd never seen anything like it--one minute the place seemed to be teeming with life; the next, he could hear the snap of each individual twig beneath his feet, punctuated by Scully's quiet breathing. It was eerie. He opened his mouth to remark on it, as well as to concede defeat, when he heard what sounded almost like the mewling of a kitten.

"What was that?" he demanded.

"What?"

"That!"

"What're you--"

"Shhh." They stood absolutely still, as if suspended in mid-air, for five long seconds. "There. There!" A pause. "Okay, you can't not have heard it *that* time."

"No, really, Mulder, you're starting to--"

Then she heard it.

"Ohhh, no. *No.* I have been out here with you too long, Mulder. You've got me hearing things." Now that she'd been made to detect it, she didn't seem able to get rid of it. "What the hell *is* that?" Scully shook her head as if to clear it. "Sounds like it's coming from right under us."

"Yeah, it does." Mulder got down on all fours and bent close to the ground, behind in the air, ignoring his partner (who was giving him an emphatic dose of Scully Look Number 9, also known as 'I wonder if the little grey men would return your brain if I asked them really nicely'). "C'mere, Scully."

Surprisingly, she didn't make a retort, but merely sighed and knelt beside him. He put one hand on her upper back, urging her closer to the rich-smelling soil.

"Oh, my God," she breathed. "It sounds like... Mulder, there's someone down there."

"Or some*thing*."

"No, listen. It--she's calling for help. HELLO!" she shouted, faintly aware of the ridiculous picture she must have presented.

The voice warbled back, barely audible. Two syllables.

"We can't hear you!" Mulder yelled, cupping both hands around his mouth. Despite the entire bizarre situation, something about his position made it incredibly tempting to just kick him in the ass and watch him come up with a mouthful of forest floor. Not that it would have been conducive to solving the problem of whoever the hell was

under the ground, but it sure would have relieved some tension.

Two syllables again, questioning.

"Where are you?!" Scully's voice gave out on the last word.

The question was so earnestly out of character for her, Mulder couldn't help himself. "China, maybe?"

She cleared her throat, trying to restore her voice. "Listen!"

Four syllables this time. And again. The pressure on her back became just a touch more insistent.

"Lie flat, Scully, and press your ear to the ground. I'll call, and you listen for the answer."

"Mulder..."

Four syllables, faster now. She could feel the warmth of his hand seeping through the combined barrier of windbreaker and t-shirt.

"Scully..." He crouched down so that her gaze was level with his own, and zapped her with the tight-beam look. That made twice in one day.

How did he *do* that?

{I can't believe he convinced me to do this,} she thought as she stretched out and rested her head on the soft earth. {I can't believe I let him.}

"WHERE ARE YOU?!"

One-two, three-four. The rhythm of the words was oddly familiar to her, but she couldn't make them out. She wondered briefly if they might not be hearing some sort of echo of their own words from an underground grotto or cave...

"It's us, Mulder." She sat up, ignoring the tangle of leaves and twigs that followed her.

"Us?"

"That's Stonecypher down there. She's calling us, saying our names. Listen."

Mulder bent low, attending the faraway cries, then nodded. "She must have heard us talking. It's probably easier for her to hear us than it is for us to hear her."

Scully stood, picking bark out of her hair. "Now that we know where she is, how do we get down there?"

The answer turned out to be simpler than Scully ever dared dream.

~~~~~



"Mulder?"

They'd separated to a distance of about ten feet, keeping within sight of each other, doubling back and combing the length of the trail--and then, suddenly, Scully found she was alone.

"Mulder...?"

Out of instinct she reached for her sidearm, which, of course, wasn't there.

"Scully...!"

She found herself tearing through the underbrush, instinct taking over in a split second, heading straight to the spot where she'd last seen her partner standing...

and in the blink of an eye, the ground seemed to shift beneath her. She felt herself falling backward...

"Ooof!"

Fortunately, her landing was attended by a relatively soft surface.

"Sorry, Mulder."

"Ooooh..." He curled up into the fetal position, clutching his midsection.

"You okay?"

"Just give me... a second..." he wheezed.

Scully stood up, dusting herself off. They *were* in some sort of underground cave, just as she had suspected. She called for Stonecypher, and heard her name in a very dim and grateful response. Offering a hand up to her partner, she peered into the darkness, trying to adjust her eyes.

"Ohmylordimsoglادتoseeyoutwo!" Stonecypher exclaimed as she came barrelling out of the darkness to meet them. She was dishevelled, liberally smeared with dirt and bruises. "We've been down here for hours."

Mulder allowed himself to be hauled to his feet. "Kinsley's with you?"

"He was knocked out by the fall, and there's something wrong with his leg. The hole we fell into caved in behind us."

"How about you, are you all right?" Scully asked, squinting at what looked like a particularly nasty-looking welt at the juncture of Stonecypher's neck and collarbone. She nodded.

"I sort of landed on Mike."

"We found the packs." Mulder held up the grey bag he'd been carrying, only a shade of bitterness colouring his tone. "As much as I've been enjoying reliving my Indian Guide days, I think now is the time to

concede defeat and send up the emergency flare."

Scully took the pack from him, extracted the first aid kit, and ordered Stonecypher to take her to Kinsley. "I don't see any moth men, Mulder," she whispered to her partner, who replied with a shrug.

"Maybe they're hiding."

And just for a second, as she followed Stonecypher through the seemingly hopeless maze of tunnels, prompted by over-tiredness and the spell of a friend's voice, Dana Scully imagined she saw...

Nah.

~~~~~

Sands Court Hotel Room 509 Thursday 5:15 p.m.

"He had *what* on his collar?" Mulder exclaimed, dropping the remote. The two, excused from the remainder of the seminar on the grounds of (a) fatigue and (b) their rescue of Kinsley and Stonecypher having proved beyond a doubt their ability to work well together, had elected to spend the afternoon holed up in Mulder's room enjoying cable privileges.

Scully smiled smugly. "Lipstick."

"Are you sure?"

"Not only that, but Stonecypher had the mother of all hickeys right there on her chest, in plain view. I'm surprised you and your well-known powers of observation didn't notice."

"I'm not in the habit of looking at Sharon Stonecypher's chest, Scully," he protested mildly. "I'm surprised you are."

"It was dark; I thought it was a bruise," she confessed, claiming the remote and clicking off the television. "Once I saw him I put one and one together."

"Pardon the pun."

"So tell me, Mulder, did you see any moth men while you were waiting for the rescue team?"

He grinned. "You're never going to stop riding me about that, are you? Come on, now, Scully, I've been more that graceful to you, considering all the times that I've been right."

"All the--! Such as?"

"Well, what about--"

"That was never--"

"Why can't you just--"

"You're so--"

"*You're* so--"

{Ah, teamwork,} thought Mulder, in the brief instant both agents were forced into silence by the necessity of having to breathe in between arguments. {What a glorious thing.}

"That's it." Scully stood up, tossed a pillow at him from across the room, and checked her appearance in the glass of a convenient picture frame. "I've had enough of this. I'm going for a drink."

Mulder sat regarding her, one eyebrow raised.

"It'd be a lot more interesting if you came along, you know," she remarked, which was all the invitation he needed.

The End.

Fifty percent of women say feedback is better than chocolate. On the other hand, at least I get chocolate on a regular basis. Please write. Thank you for your time.

End
file.